

BOOK REVIEW

Sreedhar and Mahendra Ved, The Afghan Turmoil : Changing Equations, New Delhi, Himalayan Books, 1998, 222 pages.

Since the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan and the eventual resumption of power by the resistant group the Mujahideen, civil war between the various groups vying for power and control in the country soon set in motion a process aptly dubbed by many as the 'Lebanonization of Afghan internal politics'. Like in the case of Lebanon, the internal war in post-Soviet Afghanistan soon turned out to be a struggle for power among the rival groups, each trying to advance its own political interests and strengthen its power base in the country through armed and violent means. Until very recently the various opposing Afghan groups operated in unison with one of the two major rival groups i.e., Hizb-e-Islami headed by Hekmatyar and Jamat-e-Islami headed by Burhanuddin Rabbani or acted independently. The third group, the Taliban that suddenly appeared in 1994 under Mullah Omar has been a new factor to further complicate the internal political equation of Afghanistan. Initially, in possession of ten to twelve minor cities, the Taliban reached the zenith of their political success when they finally succeeded in occupying Kabul and in overthrowing the government of Rabbani by dislodging its forces in 1996. Since then, the Taliban phenomenon in Afghan politics has provoked the interests of the analysts and observers on many counts. To the international community, it was

simply inconceivable as how a group of unruly village boys with *madrassah* background could organise themselves into a well-equipped guerrilla force so as to overrun the regular forces of Kabul government. More complex for the international community was to understand the real motives behind the extremist Islamic programme of the Taliban. In other words, their logic of purifying the Muslims in a country exclusively Islamic through violent means was put into question. Also the Pashtun ethnic composition of the Taliban did not certify, in presence of the other two major ethnic groups (Tajiks and Uzbeks) its overall representative power in the complex Afghan society.

Doubt, confusion and suspicion continue to prevail over the Taliban phenomenon and this has provoked the analysts to look from a much broader perspective at various factors or dynamics i.e. internal, regional and international, that gave naissance to this new force in Afghanistan. In this connection, the academic interests of the analysts and observers have remained focused mainly on few questions like (i) the growth of Taliban (ii) its regional and extra-regional linkage (iii) its politico-strategic objectives (iv) its power hold and activities in the Afghan society and (v) its impact at the internal, regional and international levels. It is in this direction that Sreedhar and Virendra Ved have endeavoured to write a comprehensive book on the Taliban phenomenon under the title 'The Afghan Turmoil : Changing Equations'. Sreedhar, a senior research scholar at the Institute for Defense Studies and Analyses, and Mahendra Ved, a special correspondent of Times of India, New Delhi, have joined their efforts to bring a number of Taliban related events within an analytical and objective discussion. The methodology of the book is based on an empirical and analytical approach towards understanding the Taliban problem. Works from books, journals, newspapers and publications of few international

bodies constitute the research documents of the authors. The book contains ten chapters with a brief introduction. The section 'Introduction' of the book reflects the authors' anxiety over the on-going inter-ethnic conflict between the Taliban and the forces opposed to it in Afghanistan. Terming the conflict as a war of attrition, the authors express little optimism as to the willingness of the warring parties to accept any peace initiative either by their friends or by the United Nations or to concede to any peace formula except on their terms. In particular, they view with concern the dependance of the Taliban and anti-Taliban forces on the drug money to keep their fighting capability on. The authors view that the neutralisation of the Taliban by lessening its dependance on Pakistani may pave the road for a future settlement of the present Afghan crisis.

In the first chapter entitled, "Taliban Flounders", the authors try to show that the genesis of the Taliban movement lies in Pakistan's long old Afghan policy of maintaining a friendly and subservient government in Kabul. In this respect, their concentration has mainly been on the joint involvement of the ISI and the Pakistani Army in fostering the Taliban as a new political, social and ethnic identity in Afghan internal politics. The US and Saudi support is also brought under discussion. By citing several examples of Pakistan's military and logistic support to the Taliban in occupying Kabul, the authors try to put a clamp on Pakistan's claim of 'total neutrality' in the entire 'Taliban episode'. Notwithstanding the fact that the Taliban control a significant portion of Afghan territory with its regional and international backing, the authors are of the opinion that the Taliban leadership is a weak and unpopular one due its immaturity, over-dependence on Pakistan, adherence to Wahabi brand of Sunnism, drug connection and violent activities. The opening chapter that introduces the Taliban to the readers by taking into account its various activities, could reflect more of authors'

objective thinking if they could deal with an aspect totally neglected in it i.e., the popularity of the Taliban. A force with its majority ethnic and religious representation cannot remain totally deprived of popular support. In other words, the Taliban, despite its destabilizing effect on today's Afghan politics, could have been equally credited with few positive internal dynamics of its own. Moreover, the strong territorial hold of the Taliban goes to prove that without minimum public support, these irregular forces even with Pakistani aid and their violent methods could not have established a control nearly over 80% of Afghanistan's vast and complex territory

The second chapter entitled 'Mess-up at Mazar-e-Sharif' deals with the Taliban attempt towards a reunification of Afghanistan by occupying Mazar-e-Sharif, the principal city and headquarter of the opposition forces in northern Afghanistan. The strategy as adopted by them consisted of a forcible occupation of the 'hostile northern territory' in order to complete the reunification of Afghanistan and the projection of arrogance vis-à-vis the northerners manifested not only in the obscurantist sunni inspired Islamic programme of the Taliban but also in their general attitude of looking upon the Tajiks, Uzbeks and Hazaras as subordinates. The description of the strategy as pursued by the Taliban has been supported by a number of crucial events and facts, figures and dates, personal interviews, the reading of which may indeed be interesting provided all such information are taken care of well by the reader. The message revealed in the chapter is the futility of Taliban efforts in bringing a political order in Afghanistan under their umbrella through military means. The Mazar-e-Sharif fiasco should not have cast in poor light, as the authors have viewed it, the capability of the Taliban in recapturing this hostile city at any expedient moment in the future. If the Taliban were better placed in terms of logistics, finance and manpower, then a future onslaught on their opposition's hideout in the north was

only a question of time. It seems the authors failed to foresee such a future scenario in Afghanistan. The chapter three entitled 'Northern Alliance : A Stabilising Factor' reflects the political scenario in northern Afghanistan in the aftermath of Mazar-e-Sharif incident. The authors make an interesting account of how the Taliban tried to create a division in the northern leadership through false political promises, diplomatic trickery and financial bribery. With its broad objectives of restoring peace, establishing a broad-based government and starting new economic reconstruction in Afghanistan, the alliance, the United Islamic Salvation Front (UISF) (popularly known as the Northern Alliance) has been praised by the authors for its mature and seasoned leadership and liberal Islamic outlook. In effect, they consider it as an alternative to the Taliban representing the traditional ethos of Afghan society. To what extent the political sagacity and moderate outlook of the Northern Alliance leaders would pave the way for a comprehensive solution of the present Afghan crisis is a question that at best begs speculation and prognostic at the moment. Nevertheless, it can safely be said that in any future broad-based Afghan government, the representation of the Northern Alliance with its minority ethnic and religious composition may not place it in a favourable position to counterbalance the Taliban. In this respect, what could be the possible compromise formula between these two opposing poles? This query could probably further enrich the content of the chapter.

Chapter four entitled 'Pakistan's Miscalculations' provides an insightful study of Pakistan's role and its fundamental objectives in the current affairs of Afghanistan. The authors find a dichotomy in such role as it is marked by Pakistan's support to the Taliban with men and material at the one hand, and willingness to see a broad-based Afghan government on the other. The chapter would give the readers an impression that the Taliban cannot but stay in power only

with the perennial support from Pakistan both in men and material terms. If so, then what would be the price to be paid by Pakistan in the long run for her involvement in the present Afghan crisis? In other words, would Pakistan be able to sustain her involvement in the crisis for an indefinite period of time? Besides, if Pakistan opts for a broad-based government in Afghanistan, why does it fear the representation of the Northern Alliance in it along with the Taliban? These are some of the questions on which reflections could be made by the authors in the chapter. The chapter five entitled 'Iran : Growing Acceptability' reflects the authors' optimism in Iran's role as a honest broker of peace in Afghanistan. Given the fact that Iran has always considered the Taliban as a force backed by Pakistan in collusion with the US and Saudi Arabia to undermine Shi'ite interests in Afghanistan, her policy has been to contain the Taliban by supporting the Northern Alliance poised against it. The most distinguishing factor to differentiate the Iranian policy from the Pakistani policy towards current Afghanistan is that the former seeks an involvement of the immediate neighbours especially the CARs, Russia, China and India to achieve national reconciliation in Afghanistan. In this respect, the authors very succinctly describe a number of Iranian diplomatic and political efforts for bringing the present Afghan crisis to its end. They are also optimistic about a possible breakthrough in Iran-US relations in view of each other's economic interests in the region. However, any optimism in Iran's success in Afghanistan should be viewed with caution as well. As the current events suggest, Iran is backing the losing horse i.e., the Northern Alliance, in the present Afghan game, and to what extent its representation in a broad-based government would serve the Iranian interests is now simply a matter of conjecture.

In chapter six entitled 'Central Asia : Shadow over the Silk Route' the authors have tried to explain each of the CARs' position

vis-à-vis the current Afghan crisis that has its profound impact on their present struggle to evolve their own identities and build political and economic institutions in the post-Soviet era. The study notes that the policies of the CARs towards present Afghanistan are not identical mainly due to a difference in their perception of the present Afghan problem. In this respect, the authors have very aptly described how certain factors like geography, ethnicity, language, economic imperatives, geo-strategic interests, regional and international relations etc. have caused a difference in the CARs' position vis-à-vis the Taliban. After an overview of the CARs' policies, the authors try to dig out certain commonalities among them i.e., their unwillingness to toe the Pakistani line on Afghanistan, strong reservations about the Taliban, more political respect for Iran and a desire to see a broad-based government in Afghanistan. The chapter is very interesting to read as it reveals how a crisis within a particular region has different implications for different parties. Also it goes to show the internal, regional and international dynamics of a particular crisis.

The chapter seven entitled 'Europe : Playing Second Fiddle to Uncle Sam' makes an attempt to study Europe's low profile political policy towards the present Afghan crisis, notwithstanding its basic concern with the oil and gas exploration in the CARs.. That Europe has no precise and concrete policy towards today's Afghanistan is well argued in the chapter with few examples of European diplomacy that ended in utter failure to bring normalcy in Afghanistan. The chapter eight entitled 'Pipeline Politics : A Subdued Replay of the Great Game' presents a very interesting picture of the outsiders' scramble for oil in the region. The phenomenon is, as the authors opine, 'somewhat akin to the 19th century's 'Great Game' between the Russian and British Empires for gaining influence in the region. Given the fact that the oil rich CARs

are land-locked, the question of transporting their oil to the outside world has given birth to what the authors term as 'pipeline politics'. They affirm that the 'pipeline politics' oblige the multinational companies to transport the CARs' oil either through Iran or Afghanistan. Those preferring the latter are found to manipulate either the Taliban or the Northern Alliance for a safe passage of oil to the outside world. It is this outside interference in Afghanistan's internal affairs that has raised the anxiety of the authors on few counts. Also the entry of India into the pipeline politics is viewed by the authors with reservations as its participation in oil route needs normal political relations with Pakistan, its hostile neighbour. With facts, figures, data, tables and maps, the chapter on oil politics would of interest to any reader.

The chapter nine 'India's Options' deals with the Indian perspective of viewing the current crisis in Afghanistan. The recent Pakistan sponsored Taliban movement in concert with the US and Saudi Arabia is considered by the authors as a calculated Pakistani move to block Indian inroads in the present Afghanistan body politic. They have also been frank enough to admit that India's options in Afghanistan are limited and lie basically in low key diplomacy to bring here a semblance of stability. However, the diplomacy to be pursued by India makes no reference to Pakistan. By all calculations, Pakistan is now the most important factor in today's Afghanistan politics. Thus any meaningful Indian interaction with Afghanistan would demand of India to have the same with Pakistan. Thus the author's suggestion for India to collaborate with the neighbours of Afghanistan with the exception of Pakistan may stand unrealistic. Given the fact that both India and Pakistan have conflicting claims over their fraternal relations with Iran and the CARs, the chapter could have also dealt with a comparative study of the advantages and disadvantages these two countries have in the

region. The chapter ten entitled 'New Peace Prospects : Taliban's Eclipse?' records the failure of the UN efforts in bringing an end to the present impasse over the Afghan imbroglio. The authors mainly blame Pakistan that in collusion with the US has frustrated several international peace efforts including the Tehran sponsored conference in 1996 to explore the prospects of peace in Afghanistan. At the same time, they are optimistic about the peace efforts of the forces opposed to the Taliban for a possible breakthrough in today's Afghanistan politics.

The book under review is a comprehensive work towards understanding the complex chain of events that led to the emergence of Taliban as well as its stay in power in today's Afghan politics. The work which is based on well documented research gives the readers a scope to understand the total dimension of the Taliban factor with its internal, regional and international ramifications. The Indian perspective from which the book has been written may appear to many as the authors' bias or prejudice against the Pakistani sponsored Taliban in Afghanistan. In such case, one has to remain honest to the principal objective of the book that consists in proving that the Taliban factor is nourished not only by Pakistan but also by the forces external to the region with definite strategic and economic objectives in mind. More important to take note of is the authors' recourse to sources or references of non-Indian origin. The end-notes and appendices at the end of the book are extremely rich and may create for any researcher a starting ground for a further study on the subject.

At the end, the authors deserve congratulations for their intellectual courage in writing a book on such a current and complex subject like the Taliban. Given the fact that the Taliban now occupy a central place in Afghan's complex politics and that many developments around it are yet to unfold before us, the work of

Sreedhar and Ved, despite few minor deficiencies, would provoke the readers intellectually and earn their appreciation for its critical and objective vision on a complex and seemingly intractable political phenomenon like the Taliban.

Dr. Abul Kalam Azad
Research Fellow
Bangladesh Institute of International
& Strategic Studies, Dhaka